

The 9-11 Commission Report:

The Middle East Dimension

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Brief Analysis

The 9-11 Commission has received much media attention for its findings on the al-Qaeda threat. The commission's documents detail information on Middle Eastern states and terrorist groups. Below is a summary of some of the report's findings on the roles key regional actors played in the growth, setbacks, and evolution of al-Qaeda.

Lack of Reform

In discussing the roots of Islamic extremism, the report alludes to need for economic and political reform in many Middle Eastern states: "Economic openness is essential. Terrorism is not caused by poverty. Indeed, many terrorists come from relatively well-off families. Yet when people lose hope, when societies break down, when countries fragment, the breeding grounds for terrorism are created. Backward economic policies and repressive political regimes slip into societies that are without hope, where ambition and passions have no constructive outlet."

Iran and Hizballah

Although the commission found no evidence that Iran or Hizballah had knowledge of the September 11 plot, the report cites numerous examples of assistance given to al-Qaeda by Iran and Hizballah. These included: the ease with which al-Qaeda operatives were able to travel through Iran (potentially problematic stamps were not put in Saudi operatives' passports at the border, and at least eight of the September 11 hijackers transited the country between October 2000 and February 2001); a "persistence of contacts between Iranian security officials and senior al-Qaeda figures" (Iran informally agreed to support al-Qaeda training with the understanding that such training would be used "for actions carried out primarily against Israel and the United States"); and training of al-Qaeda operatives in explosives, security, and intelligence on at least two occasions, with one group trained in Iran around 1992, and a second trained by Hizballah in Lebanon's Beka'a Valley in the fall of 1993.

This does not mean the relationship between Iran and al-Qaeda has always been uniformly warm. Fearing the loss of his Saudi backers, Osama bin Laden turned down Iranian overtures to strengthen cooperation after al-Qaeda's successful attack on the USS Cole. For its part, Tehran provided assistance to the Northern Alliance in its conflict with the al-Qaeda-allied Taliban. Despite occasional setbacks, the report makes clear that Iran and Hizballah's relationship with al-Qaeda "demonstrated that Sunni-Shia divisions did not necessarily pose an insurmountable barrier to cooperation in terrorist operations."

Iraq

Even though bin Laden had at times supported Islamist groups operating from Iraq's north against Saddam, Iraqi and al-Qaeda officials met several times. Iraq apparently did not respond to a request from bin Laden to establish training camps in Iraq; another approach received an underwhelming response at a time when Iraq was trying to mend ties with Saudi Arabia. Iraq initiated contact with al-Qaeda in 1998, sparking a series of "friendly contacts." Baghdad offered bin Laden safe haven in 1999, but he chose to remain in Afghanistan.

In the final analysis, the 9-11 Commission determined that "to date, we have seen no evidence that these or the earlier contacts ever developed into a collaborative operational relationship."

Israel

As al-Qaeda grew out of the Afghan mujahedin in the late 1980s, differences developed between bin Laden and Abdullah Azzam, the co-founder of Maktab al Khidmat (Afghan Services Bureau), an al-Qaeda precursor. Azzam, a Palestinian, favored focusing future operations against Israel, while bin Laden viewed Israel as a secondary enemy behind America, seeing the latter as the "head of the snake."

The report states that in mid-2001, September 11 mastermind Khalid Shaykh Mohammed (often known simply by the acronym KSM) broached the idea of recruiting a Saudi Air Force pilot to commandeer a jet and attack the Israeli city of Eilat. In line with his worldview, bin Laden approved of the idea but told Mohammed to wait until after the September 11 attacks. Bin Laden did, however, try to push the date of the September 11 attacks forward in the hopes of energizing the Palestinian uprising in the West Bank and Gaza that began a year earlier.

Saudi Arabia

"Saudi Arabia has been a problematic ally in combating Islamic extremism," the report states. "At the level of high policy, Saudi Arabia's leaders cooperated with American diplomatic initiatives aimed at the Taliban or Pakistan before September 11. At the same time, Saudi Arabia's society was a place where al-Qaeda raised money directly from individuals and through charities. It was the society that produced fifteen of the nineteen hijackers."

The report also notes that Mohammed estimated that 70 percent of al-Qaeda training camp attendees were Saudis; radical Egyptian Islamists in the Kingdom's education system influenced bin Laden and several of his associates; and bin Laden escaped the Kingdom, despite the confiscation of his passport, with the aid of a "dissident" member of the royal family.

Sudan

From 1991 to 1996, al-Qaeda was based in Sudan. There, bin Laden established the "Islamic Army Shura" -- a body that acted to coordinate the growing network of affiliated terrorist organizations that eventually became known as al-Qaeda. During this period bin Laden funded the training of Egyptian terrorists in Sudan. In 1995, an Egyptian group based in Sudan with links to bin Laden attempted to assassinate Egyptian president Mubarak in Ethiopia. Sudan refused to hand over the individuals thought to be involved, facilitated al-Qaeda meetings with Iraqi intelligence, and hosted conferences for a wide array of terrorist groups.

Al-Qaeda paid \$1.5 million for a cylinder of what they thought was weapons-grade uranium from a Sudanese military officer. The purchase turned out to be a scam, but it demonstrated both bin Laden's determination to acquire weapons of mass destruction and the extent of finances at his disposal. Faced with sanctions and mounting pressure to expel bin Laden, "Sudan offered to expel Bin Ladin to Saudi Arabia and asked the Saudis to pardon him." Negotiations also took place between the Sudanese government and U.S. representatives, but the Sudanese never offered to hand bin Laden over to the United States as a Sudanese official had claimed. On his departure, the Sudanese government seized all of bin Laden's assets in the country.

Syria

While Syria exerted pressure on Sudan to stop providing basing for al-Qaeda in the 1990s, one of the September 11 hijackers may have transited Syria in early 2001. No mention was made of Syrian support for Hizballah, Palestinian groups, or the presence of al-Qaeda affiliates in Syria.

United Arab Emirates

One of only three countries to recognize the Taliban government, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) was a major transit route for al-Qaeda operatives and a hub for financial transfers to al-Qaeda and the Taliban. Some Emirate officials were apparently tied to al-Qaeda, as suggested by the presence of an official government plane at an al-Qaeda training camp in Afghanistan. After being pressed on the matter by U.S. officials, the camp was "hurriedly dismantled, and the site was deserted." Prior to September 11, the UAE walked a fine line, trying not to anger the United States but remaining close to the Taliban. Since September 11, UAE officials have sought to disrupt al-Qaeda financial transactions taking place in that country.

Yemen

According to the report, Khalid Shaykh Mohammed estimated that Yemenis comprise one fifth of the people at al-Qaeda training camps. In 1999, Yemeni authorities arrested Tawfiq bin Attash (a.k.a. Khallad), unaware of his al-Qaeda affiliation. Fearing that he would give away vital information of the plans to attack U.S. naval assets off Yemen, bin Laden allegedly demanded Khallad's release; in exchange, he would assure that al-Qaeda would not attack the Yemenis. Khallad was released around the middle of the year. After the successful attack on the USS Cole, Yemeni assistance to U.S. investigators was lukewarm at best. This changed later, when Yemen shared information from captured USS Cole plotters with the FBI.

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